

Message

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Subject: From MLive: Lead 'nanoparticle' worries sped Benton Harbor response, officials testify

FYI ...

Lead 'nanoparticle' worries sped Benton Harbor response, officials testify

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LANSING, MI — Michigan officials testified that concerns about potential lead nanoparticles passing through tap water filters in Benton Harbor drove the state's recommendation that residents switch to bottled water this month, a move that came three years after the city first began exceeding action levels for the toxic metal in its drinking water.

The disclosure came amid a hearing before the state House Oversight Committee in Lansing on Thursday, Oct. 21, during which Republican lawmakers repeatedly questioned why a heightened state response to lead in the city's water supply didn't happen before this fall.

Thousands of cases of bottled water have surged into Benton Harbor in the past three weeks after the state environmental and health departments urged people on Oct. 6 to avoid their tap water "out of an abundance of caution."

Since then, the state has pledged to remove all the city's lead service lines by April 2023 and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer is pressing the legislature to appropriate \$11.4 million for that.

Republicans have attacked the governor over the issue, claiming her administration hid the problem before now. The Senate is requesting documents in an oversight probe into the state's efforts to adjust water treatment in Benton Harbor.

"In the last 30 days, all of a sudden, it feels like we're going from zero to 100 miles an hour here; from 'we're monitoring, we're working on some things,' to 'holy cow — you can't drink this water,'" said committee chair Rep. Steven Johnson, R-Wayland. "What changed in the last 30 days?"

Eric Oswald, drinking water division director at the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE), said the discovery that lead nanoparticles could pass through tap filters in Newark, N.J., prompted a federal study of faucet filters that state and local officials have been relying on to mitigate exposure risk over the past couple years.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is conducting that study, which Oswald and EGLE Director Liesl Clark said they expect to see completed in a matter of weeks.

"I think that's why you're seeing an elevated level of concern about using filters," said Oswald, who stressed that state testing doesn't indicate a problem. Nonetheless, "until we can validate that the filters are absolutely effective, we want to make sure we're cautious there."

Is it true, Johnson asked, that the escalated response was prompted by a Sept. 20 petition to EPA from a group of environmental and public health advocates seeking an intervention?

"I'm not going say that's not true," Oswald replied.

Thursday's hearing came as contractors in Benton Harbor attempted to fix with a systemwide water outage that left residents unable to bath or shower after a 20-inch main that supplies the city water tower and distribution arteries bust on Wednesday afternoon.

Marcus Muhammad, Benton Harbor mayor, said he bathed in a container the size of a bird bath before traveling to Lansing.

Muhammad and James Atterberry, a local church leader, each pushed the seated lawmakers for more funding, echoing Whitmer's call for \$11.4 million to help the state replace the city's lead lines over the next 18 months, a daunting effort that's estimated to cost \$30 million.

Muhammad asked why \$10 million included in a 2022 budget deal for Benton Harbor lead line removals wasn't double that amount, as the governor wanted.

"If we recognize the urgency, then the response should be in kind," Muhammad said. "If you know this is an urgent 911, then cut the check."

Johnson called \$10 million a "down payment" and referenced ongoing negotiations on a \$2.5 billion 2021 supplemental appropriations bill that would fund a wide variety of water infrastructure projects using federal American Rescue Plan funds, which includes \$600 million for lead service line replacements across the state.

At the meeting outset, Johnson told committee members to avoid political "grandstanding" and, at one point, immediately cut off and admonished Democratic Rep. Julie Brixie upon her mention of former Gov. Rick Snyder's administration amid remarks about how lead detections in Benton Harbor water indicate that changes to the state Lead and Copper Rule after Flint means that regulation "is working as it's supposed to."

"I'm not out here saying 'this is Whitmer's Flint water crisis,' all right?" Johnson said. "We're here to find out what happened. Keep your comments tailored to that."

In prepared remarks, Clark called the Benton Harbor situation "urgent and inexcusable." She called the hazard posed by lead service lines "a national issue" and stressed that safe drinking water would not be achieved until all the city's lead lines are dug up and replaced.

Oswald told Johnson that Benton Harbor, which sources water from Lake Michigan, had never before used corrosion inhibitor — used by drinking water plants to coat the inside of lead pipes and prevent lead from entering the water — until 2019 under state pressure. Benton Harbor started testing for lead in the early 1990s and had never exceeded the federal action level of level of 15 parts-per-billion (ppb) before 2018, he said.

"That's the trigger for corrosion control," Oswald said.

The water plant at Jean Klock Park in Benton Harbor had to be updated to receive corrosion control, Oswald said, because it hadn't been designed for that treatment. The city began injecting a 70/30 polyphosphate blend into the water in March 2019 and that was increased to a 90/10 blend in February 2020 because the city kept showing action level exceedances.

Lead levels have remained elevated in each consecutive testing round since the 2018 exceedance. Individual homes have shown from extremely high lead levels this year, including tests at 889, 605, 469, 109 and 107-ppb, according to state data.

"These systems take a long time to passivate when you don't have corrosion control in your drinking water," Oswald said. "You don't have any coating on the pipes so it takes a while for this chemical to get out there."

In the meantime, Oswald said the health department began providing faucet filters.

Oswald said first draw tap sampling, which indicates the lead content in a home's internal plumbing, "has continued to be elevated, so we're concerned about fixtures in people's homes; old brass fixtures and potentially lead fixtures in people's homes that we need to address."

Under pressure, Clark admitted that city residents should consider the water unsafe to drink. State officials have resisted stating that explicitly despite the testing results, upsetting local advocates who say the state's "abundance of caution" message is muddled and local residents need to hear unequivocally that the water isn't safe.

Clark dodged the question four times before being pinned down. "Let's just talk like normal people, here. It's a normal question. Is the water in Benton Harbor safe to drink or not?" Johnson asked.

"No, it's not," Clark admitted. "People should be drinking bottled water."

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